

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 23990

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TAGS: PGOV, PINT, TH

SUBJ: DEFENSE MINISTER RESIGNS

REF: BANGKOK 23913

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER CONFIRMS RESIGNATION OF DEFENSE MINISTER GENERAL THAWIT SENIWONG NA AYUTTHAYA. SENI WILL BE ACTING DEFENSE MINISTER UNTIL SUCCESSOR NAMED. RESIGNATION SHOULD HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON STABILITY OF COALITION GOVERNMENT. MILITARY HAVE EVIDENTLY ACCEPTED RESIGNATION. END SUMMARY.

1. ON AUGUST 25 PRIME MINISTER SENI PRAMOT CONFIRMED THE RESIGNATION OF GENERAL THAWIT SENIWONG NA AYUTTHAYA AS DEFENSE MINISTER. SENI SAID HE HAD ASSUMED POWERS OF ACTING DEFENSE MINISTER UNTIL THE DEMOCRATS NAME A SUCCESSOR. DEMOCRATS HOLDING SPECIAL MEETING ON AUGUST 26 TO BEGIN CONSIDERATION OF POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS.

2. THAWIT HAD SUBMITTED HIS RESIGNATION TO THE PRIME MINISTER ON AUGUST 24 AS A RESULT OF SEVERE CRITICISM FROM A FACTION WITHIN THE DEMOCRAT PARTY, WHICH ACCUSED THAWIT OF NOT BEING CONFIDENTIAL

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ABLE TO CONTROL THE MILITARY AND FOR SIDING WITH THEM IN THE

FIELD MARSHAL PRAPHAT CHARUSATHIAN AFFAIR (SEE REFTTEL). THAT AFTERNOON SENI FORWARDED THAWIT'S LETTER OF RESIGNATION TO THE CABINET, WHICH REJECTED IT AND ASKED THAWIT TO RECONSIDER. ACCORDING TO NEWS REPORTS, SENI'S EFFORTS ON AUGUST 25 TO PERSUADE THAWIT TO REMAIN IN OFFICE FAILED. A MEETING OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY LATER THAT DAY CONFIRMED THE RESIGNATION.

3. THE PRESS QUOTED SURIN MATSADIT, MINISTER ATTACHED TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, AS SAYING ON AUGUST 25 THAT THAWIT CITED THREE REASONS FOR HIS RESIGNATION. THE FIRST WAS THAT HE TOOK THE POST AS DEFENSE MINISTER ONLY AT THE INSISTENCE OF THE LATE GENERAL KRIT SIWARA. SECONDLY, THE PRIME MINISTER HAD CRITICIZED HIM PUBLICLY BY SUGGESTING THAT HE COULD NOT HANDLE THE MILITARY, PARTICULARLY DURING THE CRISIS OVER THE RETURN OF FIELD MARSHAL PRAPHAT. THIRDLY, A GROUP OF YOUNG DEMOCRAT MP'S HAD DEMANDED HIS RESIGNATION.

4. THE AUGUST 26 BANGKOK WORLD REPORTS THAT GENERAL BUNCHAI BUMRUNGPHONG, ARMY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF TOLD THE PRESS THE SAME DAY THAT THE OUTGOING DEFENSE MINISTER HAD NO CONFLICT WITH THE MILITARY AND HE WAS SORRY TO LOSE HIM. HE ADDED THAT THERE WILL BE NO REACTION FROM THE MILITARY OVER THE RESIGNATION. THE MILITARY WILL LEAVE IT TO THE GOVERNMENT TO CHOOSE A SUITABLE PERSON TO SUCCEED THAWIT.

5. ACCORDING TO THE BANGKOK WORLD OF AUGUST 26, SAMAK SUNTHORAWET, DEPUTY INTERIOR MINISTER CRITICIZED SENI AND AN UNNAMED CABINET MINISTER WHO REVEALED CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION ABOUT A CABINET MEETING WHICH CAUSED THE COUNTRY TO LOSE A VERY GOOD DEFENSE MINISTER. (SAMAK WAS OBVIOUSLY REFERRING TO SURIN MATSADIT, WHOSE COMMENTS APPEAR IN PARA 3.)

6. COMMENT: THE RESIGNATION OF GENERAL THAWIT SHOULD NOT AFFECT THE STABILITY OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT. THE OTHER PARTIES IN THE COALITION APPARENTLY CONSIDER THAWIT'S RESIGNATION AS AN INTERNAL MATTER OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY. THE MILITARY HAS NOT REACTED STRONGLY. THAWIT WAS NOT IN THE INNER CIRCLES OF THE ARMY LEADERSHIP AND WAS NOT A STRONG DEFENSE MINISTER. HE HAD LITTLE EFFECTIVE CONTROL OVER MILITARY MATTERS.
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7. THE RESIGNATION PROVIDES ANOTHER ISSUE ON WHICH THE DEMOCRATS CAN BICKER AMONG THEMSELVES IN PUBLIC AND ADDS ANOTHER HAT FOR SENI TO WEAR. IF SPECULATION THAT THE DEMOCRATS WOULD OFFER THE DEFENSE MINISTRY TO ARMY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF GENERAL BUNCHAI BAMRUNGPHONG IS CORRECT, SENI WILL BE ACTING DEFENSE MINISTER UNTIL SEPTEMBER 30, WHEN BUNCHAI RETIRES FROM THE ARMY.
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